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SUBJECT: YEREVAN'S MAYORAL RACE: VIOLENCE AND POTENTIAL FRAUD

REF: YEREVAN 322

YEREVAN 302

YEREVAN 321

YEREVAN 334

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SUMMARY  
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¶11. (SBU) Yerevan's milestone municipal election, which will determine the city's first-ever elected mayor, is at the midpoint. Campaigning began on May 2. Six parties and one party bloc are contesting the proportional representation-based election. Violence has marred the start of the campaign, with confrontations between pro-government and opposition forces, as well as armed clashes between pro-government parties. The main contenders appear to be waging aggressive grassroots campaigns, taking their message directly to the residents of Yerevan's twelve communities. As has been the case in past elections, however, name-calling and point-scoring figure prominently in the campaign, with a serious discussion of Yerevan's most pressing issues taking a back seat.

END SUMMARY

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VIOLENCE MARS THE CAMPAIGN  
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¶12. (SBU) Serious violence has accompanied the start of the election campaign, with journalists, opposition supporters, and partisans of the two ruling parties being targeted for various reasons. On April 2, a month before the campaign officially began, a deadly shootout took place between two individuals included on the list of candidates of the ruling Republican Party of Armenia (RPA). A RPA spokesperson denied any political motives behind the shooting. In the early mornings of April 30 and May 6, two Armenian journalists were attacked by unidentified assailants while entering their apartment buildings. It has been speculated that at least one of the journalists was targeted as a result of his reporting on recent political events, including his unflattering interview of the leader of Prosperous Armenia (PA) (refs A-B). The wife of the other journalist is a lawyer involved in the defense of prominent opposition figures jailed and/or detained by the authorities, and it has speculated her husband could have been targeted due to his wife's legal work.

¶13. (SBU) On the back-to-back evenings of May 10-11, female opposition supporters of Levon Ter-Petrosyan's Armenian National Congress (ANC) were attacked by unidentified men as they were canvassing in the RPA-controlled Avan community of Yerevan. The community is led by its young prefect, Taron Margarian, who also happens to be the RPA's number two candidate on its election slate.

On May 12, in Yerevan's Kanaker-Zeytun and Davitashen communities, clashes reportedly occurred between backers of the RPA and their ruling coalition partner Prosperous Armenia (PA).

¶4. (SBU) (Comment: Pre-election violence is not new in Armenia. History here has shown that violence is a regular feature during the campaigns of pivotal electoral showdowns. Nonetheless, all candidates in the mayoral race, including the incumbent mayor and frontrunner Gagik Beglarian of the RPA, have condemned the violence. And even the Central Electoral Commission issued a lukewarm statement airing its concerns.

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EMBASSY RESPONDS  
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¶5. (SBU) On May 8, the Ambassador met with the Chief of Armenia's Police, Major General Alik Sargsian, to ask the Police's support in ensuring free and fair elections. Sargsian committed to the Ambassador that the Police would remain impartial. On May 15, after a week of escalating violence, the Ambassador sent the Chief of Police a letter expressing the Embassy's concerns that left unresolved, the violence risked discouraging citizens from voting in the election; the Ambassador urged the Police to conduct rapid, impartial investigations to apprehend and prosecute the individuals responsible for the attacks. Before that, on May 12, the acting Pol-Econ chief contacted RPA's campaign manager to urge restraint by his supporters in the Avan community. (Note: No attacks took place that evening, and the head of Avan's police personally accompanied the canvassers on their walk through the community. End Note)

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GRASSROOTS CAMPAIGNS IN ACTION  
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¶6. (SBU) Spurning advertisements on big billboards or campaign posters placed in store windows, the main contestants in this election have opted on focused grassroots campaigns. The RPA and the ANC have opened numerous campaign offices throughout the city, with the ANC attempting to hold rallies in Yerevan's communities on a nightly basis.

¶7. (SBU) A human rights activist from Transparency International who is monitoring the campaigns said the RPA has taken a neighborhood-by-neighborhood approach, going into the backyards of apartment buildings and arranging small-scale events with community residents. During the first week of the election campaign alone, the RPA organized 15 meetings with residents of the Nor-Nork and Kanaker communities. Its top candidate, newly-appointed mayor Gagik Beglarian, is shown nightly on television meeting residents in various communities, promising new children's playgrounds, new trees for backyards, and timelier garbage removal.

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NAME-CALLING AND ALLEGATIONS  
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¶8. (SBU) As is customary in elections in Armenia, there are plenty of allegations and name-calling going around. The opposition, including its new member the Armenian Revolutionary Federation - Dashnaksutiun (Dashnaks), have charged that the RPA-controlled Yerevan municipality is pressuring public sector employees to pledge their votes for their party list. One of the leading Dashnak candidates told Emboff that some voters have recounted to him that while they would like to give him their vote, they have already had to give their passport data to the RPA with an obligation to vote for the RPA list. (Comment: This is a common vote-tampering practice in Armenia, when voters are intimidated into providing their private information, told their vote will be monitored, and -- gullibly -- believe they will be held accountable if they do not vote as told. End Comment)

¶9. (SBU) The ANC has also charged that its campaign is not being given ample coverage on Armenian's TV stations. The electoral code

guarantees equal time on Public TV for all parties contesting the election. For the most part, this is granted. However, most of Armenia's roughly 20 TV stations airing in Yerevan are either owned or scrutinized by pro-government supporters. The ANC charged in a May 13 statement that outside the mandated air time, Public TV has completely ignored its campaign events, and instead given wide coverage to the other parties. The ANC said this threatens the legitimacy of the campaign and restricts the right of the public to receive objective information. (Comment: To a large extent, the ANC is right. An informal survey of the nightly newscasts of Public TV and privately-owned TV stations reveals a distinct imbalance in coverage of the ruling coalition parties and the ANC. That said, we have confirmed that ANC leader Ter-Petrosyan has been invited to appear in several live TV interviews and programs, but has refused the invitations. End Comment.)

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THE BREAD-AND-BUTTER ISSUES?  
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¶10. (SBU) Besides the mud-slinging and mutual recriminations that take place largely between the RPA and the ANC, it is hard to find substantive discussion of the issues central to Yerevan's voters today -- job security and creation in light of the economic crisis; repairing and upgrading the city's dilapidated infrastructure (public buildings, roads, water, lighting); the congestion of Yerevan's choked roadways; environmental issues (worsening air quality, loss of green zones to construction); and improving waste management.

¶11. (SBU) Instead, leaders such as Artur Baghassarian of the ruling coalition's junior party Rule of Law harp that "unfortunately we are witnessing a consistent process of 'oligarchization' in Yerevan, where more and more malls are emerging and strangling small and medium stores." (Comment: This is like the pot calling the kettle black, as Baghassarian is rumored to have profited handsomely in business thanks to his political connections. End Comment) Baghassarian's lieutenant Heghine Bisharian, the only woman to top a party list in the election, also speaks in generalities, saying that "kindness" will be the main feature of her campaign speeches. She warned, however, that "if there are people who will say wicked things, especially about us, we will definitely respond."

¶12. (SBU) One of the more substantive interventions to date has been made by Artsvik Minasian, the top Dashnak candidate, who pledged, among other things, to end the restrictions on opposition gatherings in Yerevan that were put in place following Armenia's

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2008 presidential election (ref D). The Dashnaks said they also plan to establish a financial oversight commission under the control of the opposition, optimize the personnel system in city hall, pay proper salaries, focus on human rights, and get youth more civically active.

¶13. (SBU) Touting the election as a re-run of the disputed 2008 presidential election, the LTP-led ANC sees the election as a way to "create an Armenia where people will live without fear." ANC Coordinator and campaign manager Levon Zurabian used the ANC's opening rally to speak about the urgency of establishing legality in the country. LTP himself weighed in, arguing that the proper conduct of the election represents President Sargsian's "last chance to gain some authority with Armenian society and the international community." LTP and the ANC have also bitterly criticized the President's Turkey policy, trying to score points by drawing sensitive foreign policy issues into a local race.

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NO OBSERVERS, POTENTIAL FRAUD  
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¶14. (SBU) If recent history is any indicator, the potential for fraud in this pivotal election will be equally high. Both the 2008 presidential election and September 2008 Kentron prefect election won by RPA candidate Beglarian contained wide-spread irregularities during the vote and vote count. The fact that the Dashnaks -- when

they were still in the ruling coalition -- complained about the RPA using administrative resources before the campaign even began, suggests how serious an issue this is. For its part, the authorities have also declined inviting OSCE/ODIHR to observe the election, in spite of pressure from us and others. The Central Electoral Commission (CEC) has also been stingy with accreditations, accrediting only resident ambassadors. The lack of foreign observers will definitely create room for considerable electoral hanky-panky. (Note: We have requested nine accreditations for Embassy staff, but have yet to hear back from the CEC chairperson. We learned on Friday that the CEC refused to accredit the Deputy Head of Mission of the British Embassy. End Note.)

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COMMENT  
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¶15. (SBU) The first half of Yerevan's first mayoral election has been marred by violence and expectations that the ruling party candidate -- "Black Gago" -- will win the seat by hook or crook. There is widespread belief that Beglarian cannot be allowed to fail, since control of the city which represents one third of the country's population must be in Republican hands. Even opposition supporters, however, contend that if elections were fair, Beglarian could win on his merits, because he is far and away the best administrator among the candidates. Unfortunately, there are few who believe that the election will be free and fair -- including the opposition ANC, which has already announced that the count will have been falsified if it does not receive 75 percent of the vote. It is unlikely that the ANC would receive 75 percent of the vote in the freest vote, but they are setting up expectations that could lead to public anger after the election. At this point, we do not see Yerevan headed for a replay of the tumultuous events of February-March 2008, but are watching the election closely -- as are the ruling authorities.

YOVANOVITCH